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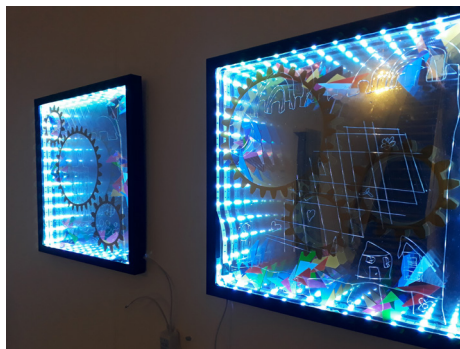
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# The Spon Spun Festival

Spon End, Coventry July-September 2017



## Final Evaluation Report







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Andy Nelson contributed significantly to the photography archive.

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### **“Ambition and energy is put into this festival”**

**“It was great to be involved in the Festival – it could become a major source of community cohesion moving forward. The initial signs are there”**

**“What I valued most about this festival was trust and friendship, networking skills, volunteering experience and community spirit.”**

(Participants' statements)

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1. The Spon Spun Festival is a new festival for the City of Coventry, pioneering a role for contemporary art in local heritage, cultural and community development. Since its inception in 2016, the Spon Spun Festival has expanded a “wellbeing” agenda for the arts by integrating a strategic approach to social cohesion, social capital (learning, skills, networking) and cultural participation.
2. The festival management group is inclusive, dynamic and evolving. The aims of the Festival 2017 were devised following the evaluation of the 2016 Festival, initiated by the Albany Theatre and its “Arts for Life” strategy. The new Festival aims are compelling: *Profile Raising* – to focus on Spon End’s community identity, history, memory; *Social Capital* -- to increase the awareness, opportunities and potential pathways for local people; and *Cultural Infrastructure* -- to increase the visibility, access and interconnections within the areas cultural and community venues and providers.
3. The Spon Spun Festival is not a single event “put on” for the local community. It is a collaborative multi-site, multidisciplinary, series of events and gatherings over three months of the summer season. It coincides with the Coventry Heritage Open Days, with which it maintains valuable synergies. The Festival is evolving a model of community collaboration, on minimal resources, and between June and September 2017 successfully delivered on a diverse programme of workshops, public gatherings, meals and meetings, exhibitions and performances.
4. Evaluation for the Spon Spun Festival is not based on data analysis or a post-festival quantitative assessment. It is primarily an intellectual exploration of the role and production of “value”, and how value is managed creatively and communicated. This is internal to the evolution of the Festival as a creative project, and will continue. Evaluation, therefore, informs the festival design and planning stages, and whose aims involve the strategic development and sustainability of the festival.
5. This evaluation therefore includes the history, discussions and policy frameworks that informed the strategic evolution of the Festival, articulating its rationales, aims, and from this, an analytic criteria emerged and by which the Festival documentation and research is assessed. The Analytical Criteria are “experience and awareness”, “knowledge and skills”, “mobility and interconnection”. They provide a means of identifying the value produced by the Festival, and for three categories of constituent -- individuals, the community of Spon End, and the City.



6: Using the Analytical Criteria, this report demonstrates that the Festival's main ventures – principally, the workshops, public gatherings, art commissions, the Art Trail, and the City Arcadia Gallery exhibition – have generated a range of opportunities and potential, each of which can be strategically aligned with broader policy aims in the City. A range of critical observations and recommendations are made on the future strategic dimensions of the Festival – its planning, production, content and delivery. This includes management capacity building, extending art commissioning and the volunteer programme, the collaborative work of the partners, and a more assertive approach to intervention in the social and environmental conditions of the Spon End community.



## 2: INTRODUCTION

The Spon Spun Festival takes place over three months. Its main segments comprise workshops and community events (July and August), a Festival weekend (9-10 September), and post-festival activities including an exhibition curated at the City Arcadia Gallery (late September).

The Spon Spun Festival is an arts festival with creativity at its core. It is not a single grand event held in one location designed to attract "visitors", and it does not use the routine techniques of festival programming and promotion. The Festival was not designed by copying or using an existing festival template. The Spon Spun Festival is "place-based" and whose programme is an investment in the Wellbeing of the local people resident in that place. It is not simply a "community" festival. It involves international contemporary arts, professional artists, curators and researchers, and purposively intersects with other City events (such as Coventry's annual Heritage Open Days) as well as the new Coventry Cultural Strategy 2017-2027.

The Spon Spun Festival is therefore a multi-site, multidisciplinary festival, operating in different segments of the summer months. It offers specialist art and craft-making workshops and also family-friendly fun in local parks and open spaces. It involves professional contemporary artists and curators and also local people with artistic aspiration or just curiosity. The Festival facilitates the cultural regeneration of a neglected part of the City of Coventry, and does so through promoting cultural literacy through creative skills, promoting social interaction and cohesion through cultural participation, promoting the contemporary artist in community development. In doing this, it supports a general capacity building of local cultural infrastructure by interconnecting social, cultural and community organisations in the area.

The Spon Spun Festival does not aim for a pre-defined set of "impacts". The festival is not a packaged product offered to a community. It is a series of creative dynamics – each of which are intended to act as catalyst for local cultural development. It generates a sense of place and local "ownership" of place, and identifies this place as a site of potential cultural significance for the City itself. The Spon Spun Festival stimulates imagination, aspiration and potential, and is a long term project that is not simply realised in one event

or on one occasion. Its core strategic aspiration is development, and development is not an event or single package of "benefits". This evaluation is therefore discursive, multi-dimensional and invested in a longer-range project of development. It serves to define the range of "value" that is emerging from the Festival and continues to emerge (preparations for 2018 begun as the 2017 festival came to a close in October 2017).

This evaluation report is independent, and has not been amended or shaped by the Festival management group. However, as will be explained below, this evaluation is just one part of a broader reflective framework for the Festival, and that its author participates in the management group (principally, as the evaluation convenor). This report does not aim to describe the whole festival, or capture the festival in statistics. It aims to articulate the on-going production of value for the development of the area of Spon End and beyond that, the City's artistic culture. To that extent, this report is not abstract or once-removed from the Festival. It is central to its strategic development, and suitably concludes with a discussion and recommendations on strategy.

The principal Purpose of this evaluation is to further cultivate the critical reflective framework within which the Festival has been designed, planned and delivered in Spon End. It aims to facilitate the Festival's further evolution – and also be frank with regard challenges or aspects of the Festival that have not impressed themselves on the minds of local people, or have not facilitated participation. The management group of the Spon Spun Festival had a small and incrementally constructed budget, and separate reports were provided for funders. This evaluation functions more broadly as both a rationale, defence but also a critical assessment of each dimension of the Festival in relation to the people and organisations of Spon End. It does not feature a simple adding up of statistical information so as to prove that the festival was successful. The festival organisation did not adopt a popular festival format, or a common measure of success. If success must be defined, it can be in terms of the frank responses of participants, volunteers, contributing organisations and venues, and the commitment of the management group themselves. And all of this is only valuable if it indicates that (a) the Festival is playing a role in local development; and (b) it is generating models of cultural practice that, in turn, allow





for the further creative development of activities supporting local development and Wellbeing.

This Festival did not attempt to impose a rigid framework on Spon End's diverse community, and consequently, this evaluation will not impose a rigid framework of assessment on the outcomes. It follows an implicit logic model, where the Festival's resources, context, inputs and outputs are considered in relation to outcomes and value. The management group (when planning the festival, starting in the autumn of 2016) engaged in extensive social networking, discussion and debate, and this evaluation articulates their intellectual journey as well as the value of the Festival's outcomes.

Evaluation principally involves identifying and assessing "value" – understanding and interpreting how the festival has produced value, both in relation to its initial aims and

plans, and also in relation to unexpected developments and the responses of visitors and participants during the events. The Official Evaluation of the first Spon Spun Festival in 2016 played an important role in the planning stage of this Festival for 2017. It defined the value of the Festival in broad sociological terms: *the Festival's purposes were as follows:*

- (i) To enable a relatively deprived area of the City to play a role in the capacity building of contemporary culture in Coventry.
- (ii) To develop the role of the arts in support of the Wellbeing, Social Cohesion and Cultural Policy agendas of the City.
- (iii) To further the interests of social justice through culture, by empowering local people through new experiences, learning processes and social interaction.
- (iv) To contribute to an evidence base for claims made to funders and other stakeholders on the value of cultural events and the contemporary arts.
- (v) To contribute to the development by way of articulating comments, opinions, perceptions, proposals and criticisms of the Festival – prioritising transformational opportunities for volunteers, participants and the community.

### 3: FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The Spon Spun Festival 2016 was devised according to a very different set of objectives than the Festival 2017, as it was part of the Albany Theatre's Outreach program. Two pioneers of the 2016 festival – Fred Richings and Catherine Groom – continued to serve on the management group, and the Spon Spun Festival 2017 maintained the statement of purpose defined above (Vickery, 2016). Now detached from the Albany Theatre's programme, it is steadily defining new aims and frameworks. Because of this, this evaluation does not begin with firm base-line data or an established logic model. Furthermore, the festival 2017 was improvised in response to new social and community opportunities. It was not, therefore, pre-planned to a pre-agreed set of objectives, a standard evaluation is not appropriate, nor possible given how the Festival was eventually over three months in duration (with numerous events, multiple facilitators, artists and stakeholders, and a diversity of participants). Even though the Spon Spun Festival is a relatively small festival (altogether involving hundreds, not

thousands, of people), its expansive structure revealed a multi-layered complexity of engagement, all of which demanded much more than any one person could indeed monitor and analyse. The Festival therefore demanded a re-formulation of the role of evaluation, which the management group continued to do through its many gatherings.

Moreover, evaluation can itself provide opportunities for productive, if not creative activity (particularly with regard to research skills). A small team of five University of Warwick graduate students became enthusiastic participants in the evaluation research process, with two others (Helen Nelson and Andy Nelson) contributing an entire archive documentation of all the Festival's many events. This in itself presented opportunities that could not have been planned, as well as informal data, generated spontaneously; untrained participants, volunteering data and feedback (while interacting with various participants); we received random feedback, often in the form of emails or ad hoc writing on a feedback form; and there remained unanticipated documentation (such as circulating publications or recent studies of other festivals, provoking debate or shifting perspectives).

However, practical restraints mean that this breadth of unplanned and largely undigested intelligence has been left to one side, given its complexity. It nonetheless serves to indicate how a festival involves realms of information, intelligence and knowledge, most of which can be lost or simply unused in the process of evaluation. Methodological advancements in evaluation have indeed been made in the last few decades, but in terms of a qualitative, aesthetic and creative-based collaborative, exploratory or participatory assessment of a festival, there remains some way to go. The priority for this 2017 evaluation has been less to "capture" targets or objectives, than to characterise value production as the Festival develops for 2018. For this evaluation only a small, previously planned, quantity of data was used, but this was sufficient to charter the Festival's strategic aims as they were manifest in practice. The purpose of the Festival was, essentially, embedded in the quality of its engagement with the social conditions of cultural value production in Spon End (the community of residents, artists, craftspeople and venue leaders). One of its aims was not to draw as large a crowd of visitors as possible. Quite the contrary, it aimed for quality engagements with small numbers represen-

tative of the social community in the area, on an individual as well as group level (UNESCO, 2009).

The evaluation methodology was therefore intentionally refined with a specific view to learn from participants and stakeholders in the most direct way possible – prioritising face to face contact, conversation and discussion. While this report maintains a minor quantitative dimension in terms of reported figures, the principal strategic dimension of this evaluation (which informs the conclusions and recommendations) concerns the way the participants' experience, knowledge and empowerment were manifest, and what dimensions of the Festival allowed for this. The framework therefore uses direct data captured only from those with experience of the festival, with a significant amount of the data generated during the Festival itself – including on-going quality discussion by the management group. While it is recognised that a range of psychological, social and cultural dynamics were at work in the process of direct engagement and the formulation of statements of view, the evaluation research does not attempt to define the qualitative dimension of experience in analytical terms. Its aspiration is broader and more didactic – learning from reactions, viewpoints, ideas and suggestions and so critically reflecting on how this can shape festival strategy in a collaborative and community-engaged way for 2018. A *conspectus of evaluation research methods is as follows:* [See Table 1]

As noted above, this evaluation does not feature a quantitative assessment according to base-line statistics on how many members of the community the festival included, reached or benefitted. Large numbers of participants, attendees or visitors was not a Festival aim; the aim was, for this early period of the Festival's history, quality of engagement and opportunities for strategic development. Of course, in time, the Festival will certainly aim for a more pervasive and penetrating presence in Spon End – as indeed the arts and heritage partnership it has created will aim for a year-round cultural programme and a central role in the social and institutional capacity building of the area. The Festival will doubtless in future iterations consider estimations on value for money or SROI (social return on investment), or economic impact assessments, or data on postcodes, streets, household income, and various costs and benefits. The Festival's total costs were under



Method	Description	Rationale
Management communications, meetings, exploring the area, publications and statistical reporting	Accumulated learning derived from experience, articulated in festival production	The festival management are defined as participants and co-producers of the festival; their experience is reflective, exploratory and a learning-based form of management
Inter-event and post-event feedback sheets	Direct questions to participants on their experience, learning and empowerment	Offers survey-like quantitative as well as qualitative data
Semi-structured in-depth Interviews	With management and participants	Provides perceptions and experience-based value-judgements
In-situ engagement	Informal conversations and queries by research team to participants	Spontaneous and informal remarks, impressions and expressions of enjoyment
Facilitator Event reports	Formal records of objectives, attendance and attainment	A quantitative and qualitative record from the perspective of delivery
Photography	Visual documentation as well as aesthetic expression	For use across the range of festival publications

Table 1: evaluation research methods

30K, with a huge “in-kind” contribution from volunteers and partner organisations, which all together have not hitherto been quantified by formal financial accounting methods. Economics-based assessment is not currently useful for the evaluation process; furthermore, while the report summarises the effectiveness of the media and publicity, marketing and networking, these were not managed according to set outcome models but improvised as the Festival evolved during the first part of 2017. They are indicated only in terms of basic statistics (quoted below). Altogether, a *summary of the research material used for this evaluation is as follows:* [See Table 2]

The analytical approach of this evaluation opens with a recapitulation of the history and strategic framework of the Festival, including its rationale, aims, and the contexts within which the Festival emerged. The sources of this are the documentation from 2016, along with three community consultations and management group planning meetings (during autumn and winter 2016). This will generate the Analytical Criteria by which we will assess the direct evidence and documented experience of the Festival, whose sources are direct reporting, notes and minutes of meetings, recorded statements and narrative accounts of participants. While, if quoted, this material is identified (whether from participant or facilitators, for example), this Festival works with what we might call a principle of “participatory equivalence”. The “equivalence” indicates that research material on the Festival is derived equally from the diverse categories

of people in attendance -- the management group as much as the professional artists, local residents and visitors, partner organisations and volunteers, and members of the City’s cultural sector, were all “participants” (not simply by implication, but as a small community festival they all attended, enjoyed and participated in festival events, workshops and activities). The Festival did not feature “closed” roles or structures of hierarchy, where “management” and producers “deliver” a festival for residents and visitors. Rather, the aspiration was that the festival becomes a community of creative practice, featuring co-creation and collaboration between all involved -- and this within, and from outside, of the Spon End area.

*To summarise:* the Festival’s events are not “imported”; expertise is local, but even when brought in from outside does so collaboratively with local spaces, places and people; the art and performance, events and displays, are inclusive and open to participation; the Festival management, artists and facilitators, are all participants in the workshops, event days, and on-going community engagement activities.

4: HISTORY, POLICY CONTEXTS, AIMS AND CRITERIA

The Spon Spun Festival was first initiated as a venture of the Outreach program of the Albany Theatre (which occupies a pivotal South West corner of the Spon End area). As an Outreach project, it was subject to the

Event/activity	Interlocutors	Documentation
Planning meetings; community consultation; walking and exploring; publications and statistical reporting	Stakeholders, funders and potential funders; committee members past and present.	Management communications; meeting minutes; consultation sheets; website and publications.
Workshops and “Summer Saturdays” (open public gatherings)	Venue hosts; organisers; artist facilitators; participants.	Facilitator Event reports; Archived summary description; Photography.
Major Artistic Commissions	Kindy Dayal; Antonio Roberts; HA; Talking Birds.	Host feedback reports; attendance records; Photography.
Open Doors (access to local organisations)	Rose Community Centre Weavers’ House; Koco Community Resource Centre; Coventry & Warwickshire MIND; Spon Gate Primary School.	Host feedback reports; attendance records; Photography.
The Festival Saturday	Spon estate residents, visitors, performers and artists.	Facilitator Event reports; Semi-structured in-depth Interviews; Archived summary description; Photography
The Art Trail (Festival Sunday)	Artists; participants.	Inter-event and post-event feedback sheets; Semi-structured in-depth Interviews; Archived summary description; Photography.
City Arcadia Gallery Exhibition	Artists; participants.	Archived summary description; Photography.

Table 2: evaluation research material

same strategic framework aims as the rest of the Albany Theatre’s program, defined as the ‘Arts for Life’ Wellbeing policy (pioneered by Albany Artistic Director, Claudette Bryanston). The ‘Arts for Life’ framework was purposively derived from the growing national policy discourse of Wellbeing, adapted to Spon End’s diverse and socially disadvantaged populace. The criteria used to define ‘Arts for Life’ were subsequently used to frame the Festival’s 2016 evaluation (Vickery, 2016). In the evaluation report, Bryanston had stated that the aims of the festival were primarily (a) *access and engagement* – the Albany Theatre aspires to be an ‘open’ theatre and community resource; and (b) *profile uilding* – the theatre in its current form is still less than five years old, and so remains in a formative stage of becoming an established cultural venue.

The title of “Spon Spun” was devised by Fred Richings and his various researchers and discussions with residents, community leaders and City counsellors. It was motivated by his view that all theatre begins as storytelling: “Spon” (as the location, a modernisation of the mediaeval “Spanne”) and “Spun” (the spinning wheel, which featured in the area’s substantial industry and contribution to the City) denoted both the process of weaving as well as the metaphorical “spinning a yarn” of a story. The title ingeniously combined the themes of local economy (the pre-modern cultural economy), where church, civic organ-

isations and local people became part of the stories, writing, memory and narrative that generated the identity of this area and its role in the City. In part because of its success and potential growth, the Albany Theatre Trust (chaired by David Meredith) determined that that the Spon Spun Festival become an independent entity (albeit with a significant Albany Theatre representation in the management group). The 2016 festival was held in May of 2016; the newly convened Festival management group decided to maintain the original historical dimension of the 2016 festival, whereupon it was practically and artistically advantageous to delay the 2017 festival to September and coincide with the Coventry Heritage Open Days. Moreover the group decided to maintain the twin aims of (a) access and engagement, and involving the diversity of the community (from children to elderly people); and (b) profile raising. These aims, however, would obviously no longer refer to the Albany Theatre but to the Spon End locale itself.

But where both iterations of the Festival focused on this specific area of the City, detailed socio-economic data on the demographics and economics of this place were not available. Gone are the days when municipal authorities maintained granular data on the districts of its city -- population, conditions, employment, ethnicity, and so on. The Festival will aspire to such an area-based



study (perhaps using creative methods), but until then its knowledge of the Spon End area is empirical, fragmentary, and embedded in its social relations. Moreover, as one of the oldest areas of the City, a detailed history of the area is yet to be written. The



current area of Spon End begins in the City centre, with the historic and largely preserved Spon Street, now truncated by the City Ring Road (constructed 1962-1974). Despite the area's geographic proximity to the City centre, its natural trajectory is curtailed, which like many of its unfortunate aspects was a result of Town Planning and not the substantial bombing of 1940-41 (which it largely avoided, being to the West of the City). Spon End had been subject to the exigencies of industrialisation and urbanisation since the Middle Ages: by the 1970s the medieval and even Victorian infrastructure of the area were largely demolished to make way for new council housing and housing blocks. This was also the beginning of the era of industrial decline, where Coventry's pioneering design and engineering industries (cars, motorcycles and bicycles) included Spon End but quickly dissolved. Today the area's urban landscape still retains a certain undefinable industrial aesthetic, but still to be found are fragments of the old city walls, and the remains of the 12th century Western gate to the city; these, and the remaining ecclesiastical buildings still remind us how the 'Sponn' or 'Spanne' end of the city was the main approach to the city from Shrewsbury and Chester, and evolved an informal social community around the dynamics of the coming-and-going of the city centre. It was once an independent district outside the City

walls, with its own parish, common, fields, woodland, water mill and waste site, but perhaps more importantly, it was a constant meeting of residents with travellers, merchants, pilgrims and citizens of the City, and a craft-based industry emerged around this spontaneous social life.

Spon Enders today maintain some sense of identity, though as the Festival evaluation of 2016 observed, there is some local confusion on where the district begins and ends. Boundaries have become socially and politically insignificant, and the local culture has not maintained the area's distinctive experience of place. Urban planning has not cultivated the identity and coherence of the area either, and one might argue that "local" culture is an irrelevant if not a divisive remnant of the past. Spon End now hosts facilities belonging to the City and beyond – "the Butts" Park Arena where Coventry RFC play rugby union and Coventry Bears play rugby league; the Albany Theatre housed in the former Coventry Technical College; the historic Weaver's House, an independent heritage charity used also as a workshop space for people in the City and beyond. Yet, history remains in the names, topography, heritage and surviving culture (churches, pubs, and community centres), and this history is active in affirming the significance of a once-resilient social and cultural industriousness of an independent place, where the structuring forces were the intensity of social interaction between inside-and-outside of the City walls.

The Spon Spun Festival planning process therefore began by adopting and reorienting the Albany Theatre's original priorities, noted above, and then developing by formulating the following strategic observations: (i): While modern urbanisation has dissolved the boundaries of Spon End, and council or social housing has created a more diverse and open social landscape, there is little sign of re-industrialisation or development emerging from an intensity of social interaction. (ii): While Spon End possesses a few significant cultural venues, these are not widely experienced as "belonging" to Spon End or frequented by a critical mass of local residents. (iii): Spon End appears to suffer from some measure of social disadvantage and economic deprivation, where major City policy trends (particularly Health and Wellbeing, social and community cohesion, and new

cultural policies) are particularly relevant but yet have not made a visible impact. These observations, in turn, give rise to a set of strategic assumptions that have animated the planning stage of the Festival (in the autumn of 2017). These are as follows: (a): Spon End will benefit from an arts festival whose focus and priority is the active, industrious cultural development of the area and its communities. (b): An arts festival can be inclusive of a range of artistic as well as craft-based and heritage-based activities – all defined and delivered in a ways that would offer social and cultural benefit to individuals as much as the community collectively. (c): The community collectively would substantially benefit if the current resources, facilities and opportunities they do already possess are identified, made accessible and maximised in their impact. (d): A community-focussed arts festival can be a long-term venture, embedded in the development of the locale (socially, economically and culturally) and can provide a framework for a range of professional, amateur, youth and child-based, ethnic and religious group-based interests. Arts and culture, when community and heritage focussed, can produce profound social and institutional value out of informal social dynamics.

As noted, there was no current base-line of knowledge available. Other festival events have been held in the area (for example, the short-lived revival of the medieval Coventry "wakes" festival in Spon End in 2002-4), but they have not remained or evolved further. The Spon End Festival 2017 aims for originality through engaging with the specific socio-cultural landscape of the Spon area. The Festival's above observations and assumptions made possible a conceptualisation of the area in three ways: as *concealed*: Spon End possesses an interesting history, with a rich surviving heritage that speaks of an enduring cultural economy (i.e. where original design and making new things were central to the formation of the identity and community of the place); as *alienated*: Spon is socially and culturally deprived (and not even fully benefitting from its own heritage and cultural opportunities); and as *fragmented*: Spon, in part a result of urban planning, possesses key facilities and venues whose connection (either institutionally, or in the minds of residents) is only partial. It is an area characterised by disconnections, deprivations and arbitrary boundaries.

If we take these three characteristics of Spon

End, following the observations and assumptions, it is not difficult to see how the new strategic aims of the Festival 2017 have emerged:

*The Spon Spun Festival 2017: aims*

1: Profile Raising – the Spon Spun locale and community identity, history and memory.

2: Social Capital – increase the awareness, opportunities and potential pathways for local people in building their social capital.

3: Cultural Infrastructure – increase the visibility, access and interconnections between the cultural and community venues and providers in the area.

Defining the Festival as a series of three practical aims necessitates a basic **theory of change** – a way of conceiving the difference a festival could make in this area, and this so shaping the festival's structure and programme accordingly (Darnton, 2008). The theory of change is as follows: An inclusive participatory festival focussed on the area, would stimulate a renewed consciousness of place-based identity, and a renewed understanding of its uniqueness, history and memory. This would provide a thematic context for combining the arts and heritage, and in a way that provided much needed social synergies. An increase in cultural participation in the area would involve community capacity-building through increased use of venues and existing facilities. Such outcomes will directly benefit the city (increase profile of the area), individuals (social capital), and community (cultural resources).

A realistic assessment of the conditions for change in Spon End, and factors that would enable or hinder a festival project, commenced during the planning stage with an extensive (formal and informal) community consultation. Funded by an initial West Midlands Police Active Citizens fund grant, three community meetings were held. The first of these at the Broomfield Tavern in Autumn 2016, the second at Koco Community Centre in Winter 2016 and the third at Holyhead Studios in early Spring 2017), followed by numerous informal conversations between management group and local residents, and whose discussions featured the following factor-assessment:

**External Factors:** involve (a) *the enabling factors* of a committed management; funders; competent volunteers, partners, local cultural





and community venues and their leaders; City Council support; and strategic coherence within the City Cultural Strategy; (b) *disabling factors* of a normalised level of cultural deprivation and social apathy; neglect and under-funded venues and facilities (providing limited resource); local suspicion about the arts, and about “outsiders”; a feeling of insecurity and unfamiliarity at any form of cultural participation; perceptions of cost and expectations (culture as intimidation); and concealed barriers to engagement (the young, the aged and infirm).

While, evidently, the disabling factors threaten to outweigh the enabling, if reiterated in terms of strategic engagement, the enabling factors nonetheless appeared to be much stronger. Therefore, in the context of Festival engagement:

(a): *Engagement tactics (to maximise enabling factors) must include:* regular planning meetings following community consultation; regular discussion and reflection following a pre-festival programme of events; regular consultation (or attendance at meetings) of local community representatives; a regular reporting to contacts at City Council; representatives of city universities either involved or consulted.

(b): *Engagement tactics (to minimise disabling factors) must include:* creativity and innovation encouraged at regular planning meetings; comparative knowledge on other city festivals and events in the area; partnerships; face-to-face contact with local people; use of picnics or other unthreatening local gatherings; emphasis of “free” attendance on all publicity; use of local community leaders to identify and engaged the challenged.

The factors animated management deliberations and planning at the outset -- on transferring the Spon Spun Festival from the Albany Theatre to an independent committee, the endorsement of the City Council seemed valuable. The Spon End locale should not assume that the Festival is an imposition

of specialist group interests, or that implies paternalism or even arrogance. One means of constructing a civic image for the Festival’s management group was to position the Festival within the City’s policy frameworks. In this regard, the Festival made explicit reference to the City’s Cultural Strategy, Health and Wellbeing policy, as well as older policies like the Community Cohesion Strategy 2010-2015, along with other manifestations of social or community cohesion. This policy dimension is also relevant to Arts Council England’s national “Great art and culture for everyone”, the DCMS White Paper of 2016, and UNESCO’s “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage”. The City’s Council Plan: *Coventry: A Top Ten City (2016-2024)* expresses the aspiration to be “globally connected and locally committed” through an inclusive approach to Coventry’s communities. This is one example of a policy “fit” for the Festival.

The most obvious policy context to which the Spon Spun Festival appeals is the Coventry *Cultural Strategy 2017-27* (published March 2017: Coventry City Council). The Strategy is an aspirational document, and dovetails with the successful UK City of Culture bid for 2021, and a new impetus for an audit and critical assessment of the City’s cultural production (Willcocks, 2016). The year 2021 is useful time-horizon for delivering on major policy goals, and the Strategy’s Goal 4 is “Health and Wellbeing”, which is qualified as follows: “Arts and culture are core to the health and wellbeing of the city. Participation in and enjoyment of city-wide professional and community arts programming responds to the needs of all generations and combats isolation and mental health in our most vulnerable communities. Culture makes a major contribution to encouraging healthy lifestyles and physical activity” (p.47). The Strategy’s goals are followed by “Seven Big Ideas”, or aspirational innovations for the city, the third which is “The City as Festival”: this “is a concept to use the very fabric of the modern and historic city as an events space” (p.58). Moreover, the Strategy’s range of other goals are also surprisingly relevant to the Spon Spun Festival 2017: they include partnerships, hubs, children and youth, community diversity and mobility. In the context of the *Coventry Cultural Strategy 2017-27*, the Spon Spun Festival (a) is already an example of a major strategy goal and many of its aspirations; (b) can deliver on City-wide policy aims for a particularly

compromised locale in the City; and moreover (c) can become an exemplary form of development through the strategic management of culture.

This last point is a key point – Coventry has always been a city of making things, design and innovation. From pre-industrial textiles, to industrial era watches, cycles, sewing machines, cars and motorcycles, Coventry was never merely an assembly plant but a design-manufacturing centre always at the forefront of new industrial, as well as social, developments.

An innovative dimension of The Spon Spun Festival is that the “cultural” is not categorically distinct from the “social” or the community (see Ings, Crane, and Cameron, 2012). As a place-based festival, its aims are social aims – to do with the Wellbeing of the place of Spon End. Coventry’s Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2016-19 does not give a major place to culture, but offers a framework in which the arts could innovate, and could innovate with a social dimension (Coventry Health and Wellbeing, 2016). For political and historical reasons, Health and Wellbeing is categorically different from Social Cohesion, but in a venture like the Spon Spun Festival it finds a synchronicity. Social Cohesion is not often an independent policy area, and through successive decades of multi-ethnic multiculturalism has not been entirely successful. In Coventry, Social Cohesion is probably most vividly typified by the Coventry Community Cohesion Awards (run by the Coventry Partnership and Coventry Ethnic Minority Action Partnership). They “celebrate projects which build upon the city’s heritage as a city of peace and reconciliation... highlight examples of good community relations recognising what local people have done for Coventry to remain a cohesive city.”

While community relations is certainly internal to the aims of The Spon Spun Festival, it by no means defines what the Festival achieves. This is where Wellbeing policy can be extended. Wellbeing has become a major national policy framework (Art Council England, 2005; 2007; Art Council England and Department of Health, 2007), but again, like Social Cohesion, arguably lacks the necessary integrated and pervasive approach (in an increasingly complicated public policy landscape). Wellbeing is now defined by policy makers as a range of categorically defined and measurable phenomena – physical and mental health care; educational attainment

and employment; productivity and skills; social care, child protection, housing, domestic and sexual violence as well as substance misuse. Where “wellbeing” as a concept was meant to understand social life in a holistic way (in terms of how all these matters can be related and the social spaces in which they are related), as specific objects of concern they involve separate public services and inevitably become a spectrum of discrete “problems”.

A community-based festival is one way of maintaining the holistic and integrated framework for health and wellbeing. The aims of The Spon Spun Festival respond to the integrated needs of wellbeing, health and social cohesion in terms of (i) social interaction across Spon End’s social class generational and professional divisions (vertically and horizontally) using the cultural diversity intrinsic to contemporary arts practice; (ii) provide a range of multi-level skills-based practices, with manual, cognitive and intellectual benefits, as well as advice and interaction with professionals; and (iii) support residents with a wide range of health challenges to use existing facilities and venues to do so. Moreover, this has informed the Festival’s choice of artistic genres, commissions and exhibits [see the following Section]: they promote cultural literacy through both social interaction and practical skills, they stimulate aspiration and imagination through community-based group work, and allow for a range of potentially vocation skills to develop (see (Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley, 2002).

Defining the Festival’s aims, then, in terms of an integration of Wellbeing and Social Cohesion, can allow the more expanded







understanding of the Festival’s aims. This emerged, by way of discussion, during the early stages of the Festival (where the management group was observing how practice was expanding strategy and the theoretical frameworks of strategy):

**(i) Experience and awareness** – every Festival must begin with experience, insofar as enjoyment is a prime attraction. Arguably, many festivals consider “enjoyment” to be unproblematic and tend to define it in terms of the pleasures of entertainment (in other words, passive consumption). In the Spon Spun Festival, enjoyment is not passive but mediated through social, community and artistic activities, and so interconnects the experience of the enjoyment with an awareness of social possibility and potential. The Festival’s most basic aim is place-based – to “reveal” the historical, mnemonic and heritage of what has come to be known as a socially deprived area of council housing. The experience of the Festival therefore promotes an awareness of the possibility of a more productive and fulfilling form of life (and conversely, making possible an awareness of forms of life that prohibit or prevent this).

**(ii) Knowledge and skills** -- the integration of arts practices within the spaces of community life means that process-based learning (particularly in the context of the workshops) are all oriented to living a more healthy, socially productive and sustainable way. They offer a sense of work routine, local community projects, resources, facilities and groups that are open access and supportive in the person’s development. In this community context, the arts have a profound therapeutic dimension (without specific strategies for “art ther-

apy”). The interaction with professional and experienced cultural workers will also imparts the kind of knowledge one would only find with formal training.

**(iii) Mobility and interconnection** – an implicit aspiration of the Festival is that the people of Spon End would become active cultural citizens, become part of the various cultural communities and use the venues and facilities available. These venues and facilities would not offer a limited range of services but become hubs of activity with a deeper social investment by residents, and moreover through the increasing mobility of residents a more consolidated network of community cultural infrastructure would emerge. Active cultural citizenry is a form of social agency, and important for stimulating social resilience as much as individual social and cultural capabilities. This principally involves the ability to collaborate, work collectively, access and manage resources, and ultimately becoming active in the discussions, deliberations and decision-making that shapes policy and the governance of the community and the City.

This, therefore, presents to us the Analytical Criteria by which we can assess and evaluate the research material emerging from the Festival. The Section 7 – “Analysis” – will use these criteria to assess the research findings (the result of engaging with participants, visitors, stakeholders and community leaders).

**The Criteria are:**

- (i) experience and awareness
- (ii) knowledge and skills
- (iii) mobility and interconnection

5: FESTIVAL EVENTS AND RATIONALES

The Spon Spun Festival is not a traditional community arts festival. It has taken a strategic decision (a) to foreground and commission quality contemporary art as well as to allow contemporary artists to take up certain roles once only available to designated “community” artists or to specialist “public” art; and (b) to join contemporary art with heritage, which is an unusual combination and allows for the inclusion of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and traditional crafts. Part of the rationale for using contemporary art is that, arguably unlike traditional community arts, it challenges routine social and community ways of behaving and understanding, and it arguably demands a more

Workshop	Leader(s)	Dates	Venue	Participants
Ceramics	Laurence Curtis & Angela Atkins	2 July	Holyhead Studios	16
Ceramics	Vicky Ram and Martin Malone	All July	Spon Gate Primary	34
Textile	Vicky Ram and Martin Malone	All July	Spon Gate Primary	34
Poetry and drawing	Mary Courtney & Antonio Roberts	19 July	Spon Gate Primary	42
3D sculpture	Ruth Spaak	27 July	Holyhead Studios	8
Animation	Sarah Jerrard-Dinn	3 Aug	Holyhead Studios	7
3D sculpture +	Ruth Spaak (and Kindy Day-al)	8 Aug	C&W MIND Drop-in	21
Ceramics	Laurence Curtis & Angela Atkins	17 Aug	Holyhead Studios	10
Script Writing	William Gallagher	18 Aug	Koco Community Resource	10
Fabric Printing	Vicky Ram	20 Aug	Holyhead Studios	7
Trail dressing (bunting/flags)	Arty Folks	23 Aug	Holyhead Studios	22
Script Writing	William Gallagher	23 Aug	Koco Community Resource	6
Trail dressing	Vicky Ram	27 Aug	Holyhead Studios	4
Animation	Sarah Jerrard-Dinn	31 Aug	Holyhead Studios	12
Ceramics	Laurence Curtis & Angela Atkins	3 Sep	Holyhead Studios	14
Trail dressing (bunting/flags)	Arty Folks	6 Sep	Holyhead Studios	22
3D Sculpture	Ruth Spaak	7 Sep	Holyhead Studios	9
			Total	278

Table 3: the workshops

radical approach to “static” social and cultural situations. Contemporary art is restless, questioning, not accepting of established norms, and always viewing the world with a revised visual language. It not only interconnects community-based individuals with the City’s cultural sector, but with the arts sphere nationally. By implication, contemporary art empowers the participants to engage in an active valuing and re-valuing of the way they live, and their representations of life and the world outside. The Festival opened in July 2017 with workshops, in between were many formal and informal community meetings and interactions.

The workshops were focussed on specialist “making” skills, where the participants could (a) enjoy the social interaction of local community, with its connections, networks, social life and resources; (b) skills-based creativity directed by an experienced artist or crafts-person, suitably equipped; and (c) where the products of the workshops were not merely discrete private property to be taken home or sold (which they could be – and this can be

defined as a benefit), but played a role in the Festival itself. For example, the Bunting and Flags were used for the Art Trail “dressing”, as were the basket making or 3D sculpture; the painted textiles for the Fabric Printing workshops were also used for outdoor events, such as Summer Saturdays.

The Festival punctuated the summer month of August (and the start of September) with four ‘Summer Saturdays’, which included the first day of the Festival weekend (September 9th). These events were open and relaxed, and were a side of the Festival that offered the most accessibility and informal interaction with local people. Moreover, its location (the grass within the Whitefriars residential estate, adjacent to The Rose Community Centre) offered opportunities for community relations, publicity and breaking down social barriers, as well as an introduction to the main Festival weekend (the last Summer Saturday being the first main Festival day). The days featured a range of arts, crafts and music – weaving, drawing, puppet making, circus skills, drumming and guitar playing



Dates	Location	Participants
Sat 5 August	Whitefriars estate	8
Sat 19 August	Whitefriars estate	26
Sat 2 September	Whitefriars estate	65
Sat 9 September: Festival Saturday	Whitefriars estate	85

Table 4: the Summer Saturdays

Commissioned Artist	Partner organisation	Numbers participating in development process
Antonio Roberts	Spon Gate Primary School	42
Rob Hamp & Andrea Hannon (HA)	Oasis Cafe Breakfast Club	26
Kindy Dayal	Coventry & Warks MIND Drop-in	20
Talking Birds	The Albany Theatre	45

Table 5: the art commissions

were offered. The main partners were Wild Earth, Sustrans, the Weaver’s House and Holyhead Studios, where each also promoted their own programs and activities in the area. Members of the Men’s Shed group served food to participants and visitors from The Rose Community Centre. In the Centre, the local artist Mary Courtney was situated and with paper and pens created the Spon End Big Draw event. Between seven and nine artists (and performers) were engaged in each of the four Summer Saturdays, and where it was initially difficult to attract local residents out of their homes, participants for each event built steadily over the summer.

**The Art Commissions:**

The commissions are the fulcrum of the Festival in both a symbolic and economic way. They signify the importance attributed to contemporary art, and also to innovative approaches to Festival making. It signifies that the Festival itself is an act of creativity and not simply a “rolled out” programme of events attracting visitors. The contemporary artists were each known for their distinctive approach and individuality, and moreover each was a specialist in a very different genre of art. While the context of the commission (a school, a drop-in centre and so on) was determined by the Festival’s strategy, the artists were initially commissioned for their suitably creative approach. Kindy Dayal devised a short story, inspired by conversations at the Coventry and Warwickshire MIND Wellbeing Hub Drop-in. Through

conversation and social interaction, she generated material from the Hub users, creating two poems using phrases and images drawn from their thoughts and memories; she then developed the story, entitled “Branching”, published in a small booklet of the same name (along with the two poems). The booklet was distributed on the Art Trail.

Antonio Roberts, with local artist and poet Mary Courtney, conducted drawing and poetry workshops with Year 5 pupils at the Spon Gate Primary School. He used these drawings as material to develop his own work, “A Place That Never Ends” (a line in one of the poems). To do this he used infinity mirrors and LED lights, exhibited at the school, on the Art Trail and the final City Arcadia Gallery exhibition.

Rob Hamp and Andrea Hannon created works for the Oasis Community Cafe, working with the Breakfast Club children. Together, they decided to produce and frame tea towels depicting the children’s drawings, exhibited on the Art Trail and also the launch of the new Cafe refurbishment. From the creative sessions, HA circulated photographs on social media and improvised a number of installations for the Art Trail. The Talking Birds devised a bespoke interactive performance on the subject, and site of, the Albany Theatre. They engaged with Albany staff and volunteers in generating material on the history, memory and meaning of the theatre and its building, and this

formed the factual content around which a performance narrative was created. Using various parts of the theatre premises as their platform, the Talking Birds repeated short 30 min performances to successive audiences throughout the morning of the second festival day. For the event, a 90 second video film was circulated on social media and their company website. It must also be noted that the projects comprised many sessions, some of which involved and intersected with other artists’ work and with contributions from venue workers; for example, Mary Courtney facilitated part of Antonio Roberts project, and Ruth Spaak contributed to work at the

MIND Wellbeing Hub Drop-in. The volunteers of the Albany Theatre facilitated The Talking Birds’ site-specific performance there.

**The Art Trail:**

The Trail was a focal point of the Festival on account of its size and coverage of the whole of the Spon End area. It also occupied the second day of the main Festival weekend (10th September). The concept of the Trail has its origins in the 2016 festival (and prior to that, the neighbouring Earlsdon Festival). Nonetheless, the “trail” has become a significant device, visibly expressing the social and Wellbeing dimensions of the Festival’s policy context.

	Artist	Work	Location
1	Talking Birds	Backstage at the Albany	The Albany Theatre
2	Carol Breen	Loop the Loop	Spon End Chip Shop
3	Mary Courtney	Spon End Big Draw	Koco Community Resource Centre
4	Kindy Dayal	Branching and poems by members of Coventry MIND Wellbeing Hub	Tree outside Coventry MIND, Wellington Gardens
5	David Dewis	Bench	Spon Street
6	Michelle Englefield	Dwelling	Ruined chapel, Upper Spon Street
7	Anne Forgan	Time Makers	The Watch Museum, Spon Street
8	Chiara Grant	Trust and Friendship for a Game	St John’s Church
9	HA	Bowled Over	Oasis cafe
10	Holyhead Studios Artists	Open Studios	Holyhead Studios
11	Kim Min-Kyung	Rain of Memory Arti Parti	Arti-Parti 73 Upper Spon St
12	Karina Koskina	Spon Spun logo draft designs	Upper Spon Street (Visitor’s Choice Voting Station)
13	Men’s Shed	Crafty Blokes	Rose Community Centre
14	Paul Nolan	The Window	Old Windmill Inn
15	Antonio Roberts	A Place That Never Ends	Spon Gate Primary
16	Christopher Sidwell	The Singing Sock of Spon End	Memorial Plaque, Wellington Gardens
17	Ruth Spaak	Fabulous Fruits	Spon End Tree & The Broom-field Tavern
18	Tom Tierney	Spon End Stories – exhibition of photographs	The Albany Theatre
19	The Upsiders	The Upsiders	Sovereign Row Park
20	Alan Van Wijgerden	Neighbourhood – exhibition of photographs	Holyhead Studio
21	Keith Watts	Weaver’s House -- painting	Old Dyers Arms
22	The Weavers’ Workshop	Coventry Blue	Weaver’s House

Table 6: the Trail artists



After the Trail, come along to Sovereign Row Park, CV5 6GY (also called Butts Park or Broomfield Park) to admire the marvellously eclectic picnic blankets made by volunteer knitters and beautiful platters made in the ceramics workshops. Join us 4:30 – 6:30pm for a **Big Party Picnic** (soup, bread and cheese provided) with musical entertainment by up and coming Coventry band, **The Upsiders**.

Performances every half hour (eg 12pm, 12:30pm etc) of  
**1 Backstage at The Albany; 4 Branching;**  
**14 The Window; and 16 The Singing Sock of Spon End**  
**V Visitor's Choice Voting Station**

## Venues Open: 12 – 4pm (\*11am – 4pm)

- 1 Talking Birds: Backstage at the Albany**  
The Albany Theatre, 53 Butts Rd, CV1 3BH
- 2 Carol Breen: Loop the Loop**  
Spon End Chip Shop, 105 Spon End, CV1 3HF
- 3 Mary Courtney: Spon End Big Draw**  
Koco Community Resource Centre, 15 Arches Industrial Estate, CV1 3JQ
- 4 Kindy Days: Branching and poems by members of Coventry MIND Wellbeing Hub**  
Tree outside Coventry MIND, Wellington Gardens, Windsor Street, Spon End, CV1 3BT
- 5 David Dewis: Bench**  
Spon Street CV1 3BA
- 6 Michelle Englefield: Dwelling**  
Ruined chapel, Upper Spon Street, CV1 3BQ
- 7 Anne Forgan: Time Makers**  
The Watch Museum, Spon Street, CV1 3BA
- 8 Chiara Grant: Trust and Friendship for a Game**  
St John's Church, Corporation Street, CV1 3AY
- 9 HA: Bowled Over**  
Oasis cafe, Upper Spon St, Coventry CV1 3BL
- 10 Holyhead Studios Artists: Open Studio**  
Holyhead Studios, 16 Lower Holyhead Road, CV1 3AU
- 11 Kim Min-Kyung: Rain of Memory**  
Artl Partl, 73 Upper Spon St, CV1 3BL
- 12 Karina Koskino: Spon Spun logo draft designs**  
Upper Spon Street CV1 3BL (Visitor's Choice Voting Station)
- 13 Men's Shed: Crafty Blokes**  
Rose Community Centre, Hope Street, Spon End, CV1 3LH
- 14 Paul Nolan: The Window**  
Old Windmill Inn, 21 Spon Street, CV1 3BA
- 15 Antonio Roberts: A Place That Never Ends**  
Spon Gate Primary, Upper Spon Street, CV1 3BQ
- 16 Christopher Sidwell: The Singing Sock of Spon End**  
Memorial Plaque, Wellington Gardens, Windsor Street, CV1 3BT
- 17 Ruth Spaak: Fabulous Fruits**  
Spon End Tree & The Broomfield Tavern, 14-16 Broomfield Pl, CV5 6GY
- 18 Tom Tierney: Spon End Stories**  
The Albany Theatre, 53 Butts Rd, CV1 3BH
- 19 The Upsiders: The Upsiders**  
Sovereign Row Park, Spon End, CV5 6GY
- 20 Alan Van Wijgerden: Neighbourhood**  
IDP, 27 Spon Street, CV1 3BA
- 21 Keith Watts: Weaver's House**  
Old Dyers Arms, 4 Spon End, Coventry CV1 3HB
- 22 The Weavers' Workshop: Coventry Blue**  
Weaver's House, 121 Upper Spon Street, CV1 3BQ & along the trail



Further information  
[www.spon-spun.co.uk](http://www.spon-spun.co.uk)

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The Art Trail was not determined through prior selection or invitation, but through an “open call” to artists. The formal call was made through various social media and on-line channels, including the Festival website, the two universities, word-of-mouth and direct mail. So as to maintain the professional quality of the Trail – as a large urban exhibition site worth the effort of walking a few miles – curator Anne Forgan (of Coventry's Ludic Rooms and Extraordinary Arts) was contracted. A selection panel responding to the Call entrants convened and made the official selection: this panel included the main Festival partners of The Albany Theatre, Coventry Artspace and The Weaver's House.

Altogether, the Festival Art Trail 2017 comprised 22 venues, exhibiting over 30 artists. This included the four contemporary art commissions noted above, several local artists, and also the outcomes of the workshops, the children from the Spon Gate Primary school, the work conducted at the Men's Shed and the weavings made during the Summer Saturdays. There was also an impromptu installation in the children's play park of woven flowers, butterflies and hula hoops made by participants at the Summer Saturdays along with the Weavers' Workshop -- adjacent to artist Ruth Spaak's fabulous fruits, transforming the playground space. This illustrates how participants, by walking,

viewing and engaging with specific locations in the Trail, were not merely passive spectators or viewers of art, but were able to enter social contexts, meet members of the community and local residents, and talk to the artists, many of which were available along with their work. Moreover, participants were invited to nominate a particularly significant or powerful art work on the Trail, forming the basis of the Visitor's Choice Prize. Trail Curator Anne Forgan was also asked to make a professional selection, which became the basis of the Curator's Prize and the following City Arcadia Gallery exhibition.

The second Festival day of the weekend featured the Big Party Picnic, which allowed many walkers of the Trail to relax in the park and where all participants could gather and celebrate the end of the Festival. Food was served on ceramic platters made in the workshops, and blankets knitted by participants were available in response to the fluctuating weather conditions. Local band The Upsiders provided music and humour, and musician Chris Sidwell along with artist and poet Mary Courtney deliver a newly composed song in honour of the Festival. It was called The Singing Sock of Spon End, and remains archived as a Festival commission. The Big Party Picnic also served as a platform for announcing the Art Trail prizes winners – Min-Kyung Kim and her piece 'Rain of Memories' for the Visitors'

Choice Prize, along with runner up Weavers' Workshop and their 'Coventry Blue', a piece of cloth woven from traditionally dyed yarn. The Curator's Prize was given to Carol Breen and 'Loop-the-Loop', shown in the window of Spon End Chip Shop; the runner up was 'Crafty Blokes' of the Men's Shed. Prizes were given, and winners will feature in the funding bids for the Festival 2018.

## The City Arcadia Gallery Exhibition:

City Arcadia Gallery (32 City Arcade) provided a city centre venue for selection follow-up exhibition of work from the Art Trail selected by curator Anne Forgan. This enabled the art works to be viewed in relation to each other, not to their immediate social and urban context (highlighting the detail, technique and quality of the work). A further selection of this work will again be exhibited in 2018 at the CET Pop-up venue, also in the centre of Coventry

## Communications:

The use of communications, before and during the Festival, was a significant dimension of the management and needs to be emphasised in this context. The Festival website alone was a significant undertaking and was the primary platform for organisation, news, distribution of information and downloads (such as notifications of workshop venues and directions, registration and queries, and supporting documents such as the Art Trail Map). The nominations for the Visitors' Prize was also facilitated by the website. Radio interviews on local radio before and after the Festival were conducted, and the presence of BBC Coventry & Warwickshire (including artist Ian Cook) added a significant dimension to two of the Summer Saturdays. Two sets of A6 postcard leaflets were produced and distributed in hard and online form – for the Festival and summer

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events generally, and the Summer Saturdays specifically. Hard leaflets were distributed to most residential houses in the Spon End area, as well as all the cultural and community venues in the City. A decision was made not to market the Summer Saturday events widely on social media or through the press, so as to retain a priority for Spon End residents as well as an emphasis on the quality of social interaction (not size of visitor crowds). The Festival management group are particularly concerned with the “hard to reach” parts of the community, where the Wellbeing and social cohesion dimensions of the Festival is most relevant. The Festival main weekend intentionally coincided with the Coventry Heritage Open Days, and benefitted from the media exposure, marketing and footfall of this popular and established event.

The media coverage was extensive: the Festival was mentioned on local BBC radio, routine City Council promotions, a range of community and local neighbourhood Facebook groups and other social media outlets; there was printed coverage in the *Earlsdon Echo*, *Coventry Telegraph* and importantly, the City of Culture Facebook page, which has a national viewing.

For the Festival, communication is central to its collaborative and community-based production; communication is a creative activity and not just information dissemination. However, the intensive demands of communication – online, print media, face-to-face and public gatherings – remains a challenge. While presenting a range of opportunities, communications demand consistent management effort in relation to staffing, editing and oversight, liaison with the Press and media, providing occasion for Press features, interviews, news bulletins, Twitter feeds and regular social media postings.

Media	Period measured	What was measured	Total Engagement
Website	10 May – 10 Dec 2017	Total Visitors	14,806
Website	10 May – 10 Dec 2017	Hits	130,026
Twitter	1 June – 1 Dec 2017	Impressions	54.2K
Twitter	1 June – 1 Dec 2017	Followers	231
Facebook	1 Aug – 1 Dec 2017	Reach	2,593
Facebook	1 Aug – 1 Dec 2017	Likes	51

**Table 7:** media traffic



The strategic coordination required for a full creative, consistent and penetrating media communications dimension to the Festival is currently beyond that which the Festival management group can facilitate.

## 6: PARTICIPATORY RE-SEARCH AND FINDINGS

This section of the report articulates the inputs and outputs of the Festival (the various events) as defined by the various research sources tabled above (management and facilitator event reports; semi-structured in-depth Interviews; archived summary description; photography, and so on). This Section is also derived from notes taken by the author at the numerous management meetings since Autumn 2016 and the community consultations that followed the Spon Spun Festival 2016. In terms of “findings”, the aspects of research most relevant to this report were identified *in the terms provided by the Festival aims*: observations, perceptions, remarks or assertions relevant to the profile building of Spon End, the creation of social capital opportunities, and the Festival’s promotion of the local cultural infrastructure.

Many valuable comments and perceptions were forthcoming from artists and venue leaders. A commissioned artist observed that the function of the art was, in part, that local residents could “reflect on how people saw their community”. They appreciated the individual freedom that the Festival commission allowed, and that enabled them to explore the social landscape more than they might have. A commissioned writer stated, “I greatly appreciated the permission to create as I saw fit, and to respond to what I heard in the group in a form that suited the evolving story. The outcome was that I created a new piece of work, which would not have existed if it were not for my participation in the Festival”. The role of art was significant in how it promoted reflection on everyday life and the area of Coventry with which local people were so familiar. Other artists noted the importance of people’s reactions to the unfamiliar, and how the area somehow felt different because of the Festival and its distribution of art works and performances throughout the area. Moreover, one artist understood this in terms of “raising the volume of marginalized voices”. The local people were not passive audiences, but were discovering how to assert themselves and their interests in the area.

Another artist pointed to the developmental value of their commission, offering “more insight on how to create artwork in a participatory way and for display to the public. Usually I create work with artists for display in galleries. Working with a school showed me what people expect from artistic interventions”. He also saw some satisfaction in seeing how the experience of art gave the children an insight and potential aspiration for “creativity and art as a career”. This was also true for adults: one artist pointed out that “My original reason for volunteering on Spon Spun was to engage with other artists and organisations within Coventry and observe and research how an arts festival can help towards community engagement, fusion and well-being. Through the process I have gained valuable and on-going connections with Coventry artists and organisations and have amassed a huge amount of research...!”

Social capital, in a relatively poor part of the City, is significant for organisations and community leaders as much as local people. The central heritage venue – the Weavers’ House – runs a gathering, The Weavers’ Workshop. It “aims to engage some local residents in the craft of weaving and the sense of fellowship created through working on a common goal”. The Festival was regarded by them as a valuable way “to raise the visibility” of their work. Partner organisation, Sustrans, further stated that “As a new organisation working in the area we definitely got to know a lot more about what is happening locally and other projects and resources in the area. So for us it was”. Another artist stated that “community engagement” offered the most value in terms of “learning about their own practice.”

One artist made a particularly apposite set of observations: “I think there is value for some people in participating actively rather than just viewing art. Drawing is a democratic activity. We all did it as kids. And there were participants across the age ranges and plenty of locals, including teenagers, who added their bit to the big drawing. It was relevant to Spon End as that was the “topic”. People staying to do it is the real feedback, but I also had people say they enjoyed it too.” Another artist, who had become a mature student at the University, stated that the Festival “has also strengthened my belief that creative collaborative working practices can be instrumental in bringing community back into Communities. Working with Spon Spun has also helped me as an artist, I feel more confident



now talking about my practice and the value of art and artists within society.”

As for the Festival’s promotion of the local cultural infrastructure, a venue leader stated “I’m very conscious of how difficult it is for anyone to come in off the street ‘cold’ to a confined space run by strange people, in particular those challenged by life generally! So engendering confidence in the local population to engage with local networks feels like a significant element of what we’re trying to achieve”. The fundamental barriers on facilitating the mobility of local people – from their routine spaces of familiarity to “art” spaces or the orbit of an art project – is the most basic challenge. Social culture has inculcated suspicion, reticence, insecurity and a sense of intimidation for organised social activity. Yet, as one of the management group put it, “by strengthening the connections between the organisations we strengthen the sense of community and broaden the offer to residents, so that if they access one

service they are more likely to be aware of other services and so feel more engaged with the whole community and be more likely to access further opportunities. Ultimately, we hope this will have a positive impact on their wellbeing by making them feel safer and happier (as well as the various specific health benefits that the individual arts/cultural activities provide)”. An example was how the Oasis Cafe were able to coincide an important event with the Festival: “It was a great way to re-launch the cafe after refurbishment and it brought a real mix of people into the cafe. A lot of people came in that had never been in before. In fact the cafe did not expect so many people on the day of the Art Trail and would increase stock and staff for next year which they are keen to be a part of.”

### (i): Experience and awareness:

From the research data, the Festival opened up many avenues of experience, and promoted an awareness of the Spon End area in many different ways – for the management



group, artists, venues and existing community groups, visitors and others from the City. The Festival, unlike many, was not contained within a limited area, but expanded outwards, drawing attention to otherwise overlooked parts of the urban landscape. The potential strategic relation between community groups, creative process and cultural or public spaces, should be subject to further research, as it is promising and has potential. But how did participants experience the Festival, and demonstrate awareness of its potential? One of the management group stated, "it's a journey... One of the things we found difficult was to get people over the ring road into the Holyhead studios – we didn't get the take up we would like... But there was a lot going on... there was quality – there was engagement going around the Art Trail in terms of visitors – the brand of Spon Spun became a profile... a map was made... good progress was made in raising the profile of it in the City". Throughout the year, members of the management group are continually liaising with partners and local venues, and invested in learning how the Festival acts as cultural catalyst for further awareness and activities. One of the aspects of the Festival that made a visible impact on local people was "getting artists and talking to them about their experiences". After the work with primary school pupils, the artists returned and reflected on the project with the children and the possible future outcomes: "I observed that the children attempted all the activities on offer." The presence of venue-based practitioners were also important: "encouraging the children and informing them of opportunities available to them through their organisations... I observed one of them talking to a young teenage girl who showed a particular talent. It was interesting to see this young girl experience this -- something she had not previously considered."

One of the Festival organisers related how Spon End was a "broken community", and coherent systematic development of a festival project is not to be expected. There are "hard to reach groups... hard to find out about them" or to find "other organisations who do have this knowledge". The lack of social infrastructure means that there is no way of finding out many things about the community other than by direct experience. "People who came along to the Spon Spun Saturdays didn't know the Rose community centre was there..." Even the local residents are lacking basic knowledge of their social environment. But, where the Festival plays

a role of "information disseminator", this is something "you can build on each year", and increase "information sharing". This is not necessarily involving publicity: one anecdote from a workshop facilitator relayed how a "Romanian weaver... with not a word of English... spent all day at the Summer Saturday weaving with us". The facility to be open in this way is significant. Yet, alienation, even among people "who have lived in Cov all their lives" is high. This is exacerbated for immigrants, international students, and temporary residents who are in the area only because of temporary council housing. Transience is a major social phenomenon that must be understood. And moreover, negative social situations are not the only products of transience; it also results in lots of new people, a diversity of social interaction, more cultural knowledge and skills and interconnections with the world beyond. One volunteer exclaimed "I felt excited, and was stressed but loved it. I felt it is very successful for me and a great opportunity for my work."

#### (ii) Knowledge and skills:

Central to the Festival programme was knowledge and skills, specifically evidenced in participant and visitors' experience of contemporary art practice and creativity (individual and group), materials, tools and techniques, and also the contribution of the various strands or parts of the Festival to the central weekend events.

One Festival organiser remarked that "there is a very strong learning aspect to it – the workshops were skills-based... they learned how to make things, how to animate, about the techniques of art and culture", and emphasised how there was a "lot more potential to do that", including the expanding of the volunteer training programmes, which included First Aid, Safeguarding and Event Stewarding. First Aid certificates were available, and Festival certification was given to the volunteers who demonstrated a range of skills and invested a considerable commitment of time. And also, as evidenced by various quotations in previous sections, "the artists who participated in the Art Trail also learned things... about the urban place and particular people... on reflective practice and learning how to improve in response to engagement and feedback."

All the management group agreed that training and learning, particularly for volunteers, were key aspects of the Festival, and also "something all the partners need and so it is a good way of connecting partners". It

is local partners who possessed latent knowledge of the local area and social conditions of local life. The Festival management had some engagement with the Spon End Stakeholders Group (chaired by the Whitefriars Housing Association, and including representatives from the Police, social workers, councillors, and so on). This might become an established route into local community participation, as the one dimension of the Festival that remains undeveloped is its potential for impacting on actual environmental conditions.

This was tested in the case of the Spon End underpass (the subway connecting the area with the City center). On behalf of the Festival, the management group requested that the Council clean up the Subway. This happened in part, but was thwarted by practical issues, which for a local councillor became "a political issue". This flagged up the role of diplomatic negotiation as part of a growing and established festival project, and raised questions on the forms of support, legal limitations and deliberative procedures of local democracy and decision-making in the area. Due to controversy around the clean up, Coventry University withdrew its offer to support the printing of posters for the subway; they did not want to be associated with an local disagreement. It is unclear to what "rights" the Festival can appeal, in its request for services or support. One management group member suggested that "We should do a lot more politically – to raise the profile of the City", but where they have "hesitated to do this, as we really want the festival to emerge from the grass roots of the people". There is a concern, that establishing the Festival as an accepted part of the City's cultural sector might "politicise it" and "have the "authorities" too closely involved".

This raises issues to do with representation and constituency – who rightfully represents the interests of the community and culture in Spon End? Yet one of the implicit aims of the Festival is to integrate culture with community resources and the social environment of community. As one facilitator stated: "There is an interesting tension... we are dealing with a hard-to-reach community... and the partners all have a remit beyond Spon End – even Artspace are no longer based in Spon End". Other cultural venues in the area – notably the Holyhead Studios, the Albany Theatre, Weavers' House – have a far broader constituency than the local area. Even the churches draw their congregations from all over the City and beyond. The only venues

dedicated to the area are the community centres (the Rose, Koco and so on). The concept (and practice) of local community resource in relation to culture must be re-framed and understood in a more complex way. One way of doing this is "looking at the mission statements of all partner organisations and understand what the Festival's offer is... how we feed into their organisational development". The Festival rationale is without doubt valid – but is different from other Spon based organisations".

#### (iii) Mobility and interconnection:

The Festival created evident interconnections between cultural and community venues, created pathways into, and between, the venues of the area. It held festival events in spaces usually neglected; and held festival events in spaces visible and in proximity to main residential blocks (on the housing estate). One partner asserted that "the festival was particularly valuable in helping to activate public spaces". The lack of use of both space and existing resources is, of course, a primary prohibitive factor in local cultural development. Another partner stated that the Festival "strengthened our community connections in the area – we got to know other organisations we didn't know and think there is scope to work with them to deliver future activities in the area, opening up a variety of possibilities for skills and knowledge sharing between organisations."

There were also many anecdotes from participants about the venues: "I spoke to a lady who brought her children to the Animation and Ceramic workshops. She said it was wonderful to have mid week activities for the children to attend that were free."...and "I had interesting conversations with some of the members of the Men's Shed. They valued the opportunity to mix with people outside of their group and meet artists and people from other organisations... Two of the members were excited to see how their artwork was received. They are considering renting a flat to use as a studio but were unsure about how to market their work. I suggested they became involved with local arts organisations" and "Whilst invigilating on the Art Trail I spoke to a few people, all of whom said they thought it was wonderful to see contemporary art work, performances and collaborative community art work within Spon End... People were engaged and asking questions about the art, about the festival and the community." In terms of the venues themselves, the festival management group are discussing



the structure of the strategic partnerships, as one member observed, "different organisations did things at different times – there is a lead partner, but other partners each contributed a great deal... Sometimes it feels like the festival is "doing things" for others, sometimes it is the partners running things for the festival". The dynamic is healthy and productive, but at times unpredictable and where the lead partner does not know everything that is happening. Moreover, there remains a latent aspiration to "support organisations in crisis or in need of development – or adapt to partners who don't see how the festival meets their priorities". A strategic approach is also needed in order that "the key partnerships will get stronger"

But does the partnership structure and aims on the consolidation of Spon End's cultural infrastructure present new possibilities for activities in either community or the arts themselves? A lead management group member stated confidently: "Yes – we are commissioning and invite artists to come and intervene in these particular spaces and respond to them". The framework of the Art Trail in this is particularly effective – 22 venues, which together offer a unique platform for artists, embedded in a challenging urban area. Many artists "don't have a routine place to expose their work to the public"; moreover, the community-based venues do not enforce or support a "professional and non-professional" distinction, like art galleries or most other cultural sector organisations. Putting professional and non-professional together is an "important combination", and one of the unique aspects of the Festival. Moreover, it can generate unexpected outcomes: for example, the ill-fated project to transform the Spon underpass (the Subway) generated "the interest in tiles... ceramics... and how this can be found in the area". The issue was also understood by organisation Sustrans as an important matter for the community, for which they have taken the matter forward, engaging many more local people in the debate.

## 7: ANALYSIS

The summary overview of the evaluation research (above) used the Analytical Criteria of experience and awareness, knowledge and skills, mobility and interconnection. In this section, we will now return explicitly to the Festival aims so as to structure a basic analy-

sis of the outcomes and their value, offered point by point on each of the Festival's main outputs.

**Aim 1: Profile Raising** -- the Spon Spun locale and community identity, history and memory.

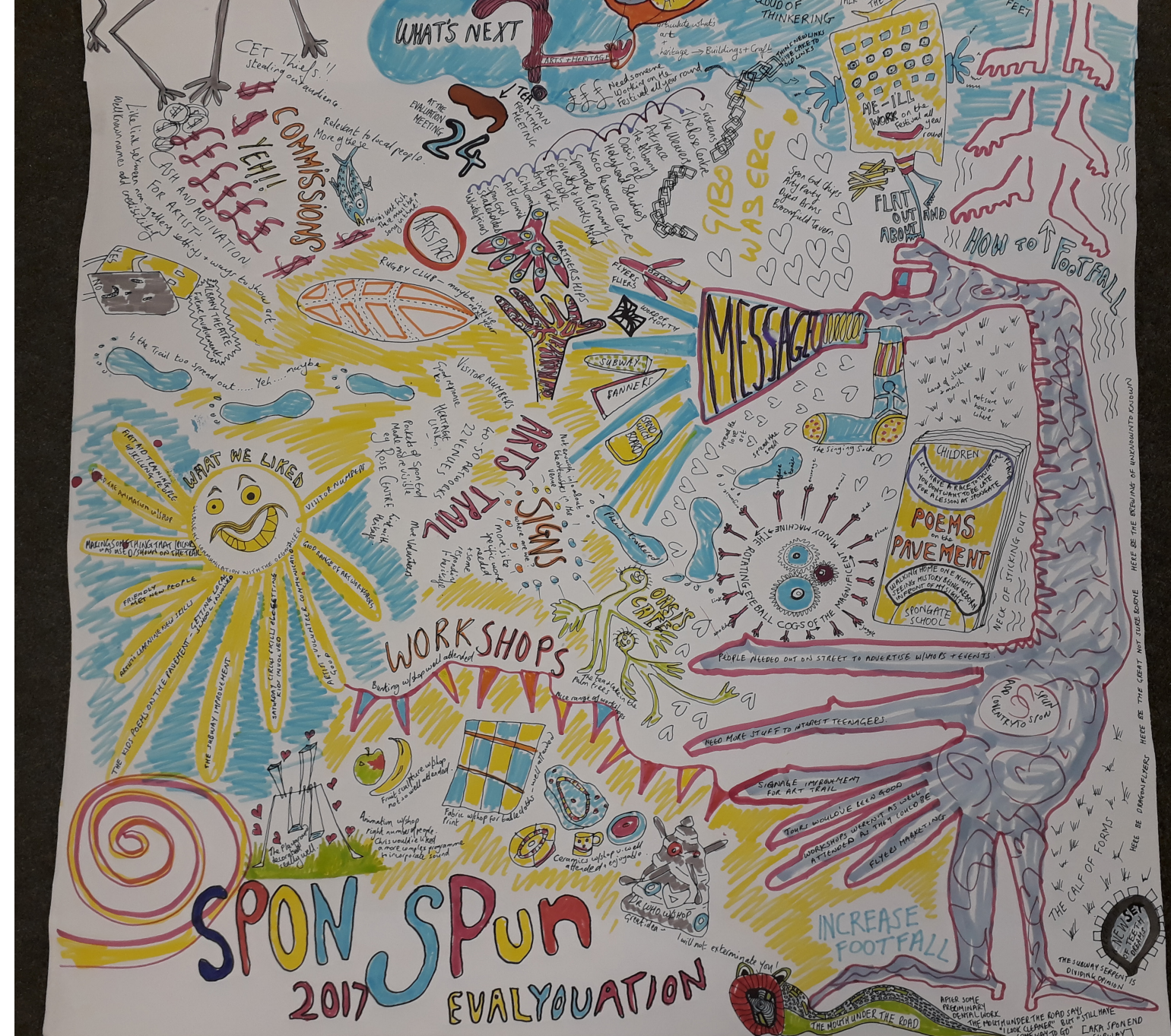
(i): *The management group* represent (professionally) both significant stakeholders in the City and also various interests in the locale – they are all involved in other artistic activities in the City, and used their networking and professional profile to promote the Festival. They adopted an approach that was inclusive (always open to new members), engaged (consistently consulting the community), exploratory (finding new place-based ways of developing the festival) and empowering (as with commissioning).

(ii): *Consultations*: the Festival planning process began with community and stakeholder consultations (at the Broomfield Tavern, Koco Community Resource Centre and Holyhead Studios). This featured presentations by festival organisers (based on the experience of the 2016 festival), exercises and extensive discussion. Local community groups, individuals and other stakeholders could assess their own interests and resources and find a realistic role within the Festival's development.

(iii): *Art Commissions*: the major artist commissioned for the festival were Kindy Dayal, Antonio Roberts, Rob Hamp and Andrea Hannon (HA), and the Talking Birds. Each were selected on account of their track record and ability to engage with participants during the process of artistic production. Together they used a range of important social and cultural locations in the area -- the MIND Wellbeing Hub Drop-in, the Spon Gate Primary School (the only school in Spon End), the Oasis Community Cafe and the Albany Theatre. They engaged with as many children as adults.

(iv): *The Festival weekend*: the festival over two days and multiple locations allowed a range of audiences, visitors and genres of artistic activity. It was widely publicised on social media and throughout the City, adding to the City's online register of official cultural events, and attracted international students and regional visitors.

(v): *The Art Trail*: the extensive distribution and on-site display of art works, installation and performance, was in itself a high-profile



and publicly accessible undertaking. Maps of the Trail were distributed at many locations throughout the City (and online), and volunteers were briefed on engaging with people on the streets and directing them to the art display areas. The 22 locations for art display, moreover, allowed individual artists to assess their work in the light of the festival's aims, and to maximise their use of space.

(vi): *The Prizes* – the Curator's Prize and the Visitors' Choice Prize – were effective mechanisms by which recognition was awarded to participant artists along with constructing a lasting association between the place of Spon End and the evolving career's of artists.

**Aim 2: Social Capital** – to increase the awareness and potential pathways in building networks, gaining vocational and professional experience and identifying opportunities (for either individuals or organisations).

(i): *Workshops*: the artist-run workshops formed an important function within the Festival. They dissolved the usual division between the artists/performers and audiences/visitors, and they engaged local residents directly. Moreover, they facilitated activities that are normally excluded from contemporary arts festivals – animation, ceramics, basket-weaving, for example -- awarding them a credibility and demonstrating their use outside their traditional limited orbit.

(ii): *Commissioned artists*: exposure to the working practices of professional artists is an important part of the Festival, and offers a range of learning opportunities. The cultural barriers between contemporary art can be dissolved where an artist engages personally with a group of people over a period of time, and their work is collaborative at important junctures. The artists were not community artists as such, but nonetheless their art works





remained with the communities with which they worked.

(iii): *Open doors*: the Festival's role as cultural catalyst was underlined by how existing venues were able to participate in the Festival by increasing their own interests in attracting participants. The Festival maintained the collaborations in the festival of 2016 with the Men's Shed, Rose Community Centre, Koco Community Resource Centre and Coventry-Warwickshire MIND. It also developed new collaborations with Oasis Community Cafe and Hub, Spon Gate Primary School, BBC Coventry and Warwickshire, and the sustainable transport charity, Sustrans (Coventry branch).

(iv): *Festival Saturday*: the first main event-day of the festival featured a range of attractions, each of which offered participatory and social opportunities. The locations and groups were small, with a critical number of volunteers briefed on welcoming and inclusion techniques. Each event was marked by a canopy shelter and in open public space, most near the Rose Community Centre.

(v): *The Art Trail*: the open public space of the Trail allowed for a maximum exposure to the area's residents. The residents did not need to be official visitors or informed participants, but could simply be engaged on the street and in a short period of time. In other words, Spon End residents could experience the Festival on their own terms, not by the larger commitment and participation

expected from experienced festival attendees or culturally literate citizens.

**Aim 3: Cultural Infrastructure** – to increase the visibility, access and interconnections within Spon End's cultural and community venues.

(i): *Festival partners*: the strategic aims of the Festival involve a networked delivery of festival activities, where the range of stakeholders and venues in the area can extend their own interests and activities through the Festival framework. They undertake this principally by inviting all local community and cultural leaders or venue managers to consultation events or to join the management group. There is a perpetual invitation to contribute feedback, ideas or proposals, and to develop the working relationship between the Festival and the venue throughout the year prior to the delivery of the Festival events. The partnerships in 2017 enabled the delivery of new activities. For example, the Oasis Cafe and Hub was used as an event and meeting space; the Spon Gate Primary School integrated children into a project, creating a range of opportunities for artistic-based learning; the BBC Coventry and Warwickshire was able to situate their "2Tone Taxi" project, already underway, in the vicinity of the Festival on the first main event Saturday. And Sustrans were able to negotiate with the City Council a creative renovation of the Spon underpass (subway), which connects the main Spon End council estate with the city centre.

(ii): *Workshops*: two months of workshops allowed the Festival to programme a range of specialist, practice-based activities not normally included in a festival. Moreover, the workshops were positioned and structured in such a way as to direct participants and their products to contributing to main Festival events. The workshops featured sculpture, ceramics, animation, crafts, script and writing, each of which enabled participants develop specialist skills under close supervision

(iii): *Open Doors*: the arrangement for venues to remain accessible throughout the Festival expanded the sense of community beyond the usual public open spaces. It allowed residents to wander in and out, or to find out about their community resources and facilities in a non-threatening way. As with most communities, only a minority of residents currently use community facilities, and so an open doors arrangement allowed advocacy and promotion, as well as connecting the venues to the social landscape of everyday life.

(iv): *Festival Saturday*: the outdoor events were advertised in an accessible way (as family, "fun" and "summer" events) and were in proximity to the Rose Community Centre, allowing access to participants and visitors. Free food and drink, and supervised activities, were provided and attracted a number of people from the local council estate. Moreover, this direct contact was used to inform and invite them to use their community venues.

(v): *The Art Trail*: the Trail geographically interconnected social, heritage and cultural, with community spaces across the Spon End area. Importantly, the Trail constructed a route that could be used in many other contexts and for other cultural projects. The Trail, in other words, was devised through a cultural mapping of the area. A professional curator ensured that the Trail featured professionally exhibited contemporary art, and where the art was coherently aligned with the Festival's aims (i.e. did not use the Festival as a mere backdrop or platform). The significance of the Trail is that it demonstrated that contemporary art is not compromised by engaging with place-based community.

(vi): *City Arcadia Gallery Exhibition*: the Gallery, situated in an old shop in the 1960s City Arcade shopping centre, is a symbolic venue. Embedded in the everyday life of the city centre, it enabled the Festival to position itself as a City festival, not just a local "neighbourhood" festival. As City festival, Spon Spun

had offered commissioned, a huge range of volunteer opportunities, and engaged with contemporary important issues in contemporary curating.

(v): *The Prizes* – the Visitor's Prize and the Curator's Prize. The Visitor's Choice was Min-Kyung Kim for her piece 'Rain of Memories' shown in the window of local shop 'Arti-Parti'; and the Curator's choice was Carol Breen for her piece 'Loop-the-Loop', shown in the window of Spon End Chip Shop. The prizes are not only effective mechanisms for increasing participation, but enable a selection of work to take place outside the usual or official festival management procedures. The curator, Anne Forgan (Ludic Rooms and Extraordinary Arts) was known to, but entirely independent of, the Festival. The selections also enabled artists to be identified for festival funding applications (commissions) for the following year.

*There are two other dimensions of the Festival that require particular consideration* – the unusual structure and the intra-management dialogue (the way the management processed forthcoming information, intelligence and feedback throughout):

*The Festival structure*: the Festival effectively worked with a tripartite structure, over three months. This comprised the pre-Festival programme of workshops and community gatherings, the Festival weekend of community gathering, performance and contemporary art trail (exhibitions), and post-Festival exhibition (City Arcadia Gallery) and further community gatherings. In reality, the structure was more complex, and there was little sense of "pre" and "post" as all events were defined under the umbrella of the Festival. This does, however, raise a strategic question on whether the local people and communities understand and identify with a relatively dispersed range of events, and whether the Festival's long duration dispels a sense of momentum or intensity (or conversely, how momentum or intensity are developed, if relevant at all). Traditionally, a festival gathers one group of people in one place for a significant and fresh collective experience. New models of festival are now common, and the Spon Spun Festival 2017 gathered smaller series of audiences or community groups and where the small-scale of the Festival was an advantage in terms of creating a sense of individual engagement and inclusion of marginalised people, but also the quality of artistic experience.



On the constructive side, there were some distinct strategic advantages to pre-Festival event schedule. *It offered a strategic facility to:*

- (i) Develop the Festival management strategy over a significant period in relation to successive events and diverse audiences, testing theories, evolving techniques, and establishing relationships.
- (ii) Generate immediate feedback and set up inter-organisational dialogues within the area and the City. This enables the interconnection of the festival with other cultural venues and providers.
- (iii) Create an effective communication strategy as the audience develops -- using networks and partner venues.
- (iv) Enfranchise workshop participants as forthcoming festival participants, creating extensive active participants in the area who are better placed to reach into the "hard to reach" marginalised groups.
- (v) The social or public gatherings (Summer Saturdays and so on) were useful in attracting families or groups, or even regular users of the park or open space who might not be aware or inclined to attend the festival. Public gatherings are an effective means of becoming visible in the community, or to conclude a significant day (like the Art Trail or second day of the Festival weekend) and to allow direct contact between the community and Festival organisers.

*The intra-Festival dialogue:* The role of evaluation encompasses an assessment of the role of dialogue, discussion and deliberation within the design, planning and management of the Festival – particularly within management group meetings. Normally, an evaluation attends to outputs and outcomes, not the internal processes of production and management. Indeed it is difficult to maintain a perpetual archive of meetings and thoughts, formal and informal. Yet given the Festival's long term aims for sustainability, the quality of the management group's intellectual thought, research and deliberation, is critical to the formation of a truly innovative and successful festival. Noted below are the key responses and remarks made and noted within management group meetings in response to the design, planning and management of the range of Festival events.

The management group was comprised of seven committed members, but where membership was open to community or ven-

ue leaders; occasionally, interested parties would attend a management group meeting out of interest. There was no strategic way of processing continual feedback or digesting intelligence, other than verbal reporting at a meeting and the minutes of meetings. The interpersonal contact made possible by the management group's presence in the community and city, meant that most feedback remains on an informal level, except for meetings. Community consultations were taken seriously and structured in a way that used various forms of recorded dialogue. This below was one of the final consultations, by artist May Courtney [See photo].

The management group's discussions were recorded in note form, by both Chair and group member tasked with evaluation, and these provide an instructive reflection on the views on what the Festival was achieving and where the challenges lay. *The main points can be summarised as follows.*

(i): *The workshops:* while workshops can be dispersed around the area, it transpired that the most convenient and effective location for most of the workshops is the Community Room at Holyhead Studios. This allows for the use of the facilities, moreover as valuable building and cultural resource (providing artist studios) the increased activity can be important for advocacy as well as economically. This presents the possibility that the workshops could be managed and delivered by the Holyhead Studios staff as part of their own programme, but delivered for, and coordinated with, the Festival. This could be advantageous with respect to the expansive scale of the Festival, the need to increase partners, and the workload taken off the management group. However, it also raises strategic questions on the Festival's development.

(ii): *The scheduling* of the main Festival weekend event was purposively to coincide the Festival with the Coventry Heritage Open Days. The presented obviously benefits, that in September (and encroaching autumn) it represented a continuing visitor momentum in the City, and that a local festival could be represented (by publicity and to a wider "footfall") in a far greater capacity through being appended to the Open Days. Furthermore, partners from the heritage sector were valued on the Festival management group – and it made the Spon Spun's historical interests in memory and local identity more substantial. However,

there was some confusion expressed on the overlap, and one management member states that "more needs to be done to distinguish these two strands of the Festival from each other so that each can be better celebrated in their own right."

(iii): *The Art Trail* was a central achievement of the Festival, quite unique in its capacity to attract and involve both community and visitors. Yet the practice of creating a "trail" can be problematic in the following ways: (a) signage and the orientation of the Trail – the Trail needs to open up and reveal the urban place of Spon End, as much as display art; the relation between the art and the immediate location requires further research; (b) The temporal dimension -- understanding the relation between space and time in the Trail is important, and the current estimations of four hours to walk and view the Trail may be optimistic. The actual physicality of the walked duration requires more assessment; (c) Progression and the time it can take to see and experience the Trail -- this is difficult to ascertain, and consequently there were some who suggested "concentrating the Art Trail in one area of Spon End in order to encourage a greater gathering of people in one place".

(iv): *Communication* with the Spon End community is a difficult matter. One management group member suggested that "A longer lead in with engagement work on the commissions will also help to build considerably on the work done to involve the local community", and also pointed out how difficult a challenge communication was (or understanding how communication was received). It also presents a challenge that demands endless resource, coordination and time. "Despite leafleting the local area, putting up banners and information on the website and social media, the most effective method of bringing some members of the community to events was to walk around the area talking to people and, in the case of the Summer Saturdays, announce the event using a megaphone. This is thought to reflect low literacy rates in the area, the high proportion of people speaking English as an additional language or not at all, and low incomes resulting in limited use of the internet."

## 8: CONCLUSIONS

The approach to evaluation in the Spon Spun Festival 2017 was internal to the management group's administration and decision making, and now informs their strategic development. While this report is independently authored, the author is part of the management group and has taken an active role in decision making as well as continuing notes and records on the intellectual quality of decision making. This report, therefore, does not pretend to complete objectivity, and rather, features an implicit claim that complete objectivity is not currently, in itself, useful. A critical approach to evaluation can effectively identify the limitations or failings of a project, while also identifying the endemic factors and potential that could mitigate against such or that provide the basis for development and growth.

The evaluation is, above all, an identification and assessment of "value". How is value defined for our three constituencies – the City, individuals and the Spon End community and in terms of an active, engaged, production of value (not drawing on latent or historical "art is good for you" assumptions).

### Defining value: for the City

(i) Strategic development – the Festival is an entirely independent artistic venture exemplifying Goal 4 of the new Cultural Strategy (an artistic approach to "Health and Wellbeing") along with the aspiration for "City as Festival", where all opportunities and areas of the City are able to create new art, enjoyment and community participation.

(ii) Participation – there is an increase in the use of City funded community and cultural venues in Spon End. The leaders of the venues are also participating in new collaborations promoting local development.

(iii) Local development – the Festival signifies a new self-managed approach to local development (social, cultural, and educational). It offers potential in areas Council services find difficult to penetrate or cover.

(iv) Education – the Festival registers an increase in cultural literacy in the City, as well as the practical social-institutional impact of cultural literacy.

(v) Investment – active cultural venues seek funding from outside the City and can attract external investment, as well as add to the prestige of the City as visitor destination, leisure and hospitality location, a place to live and do business.



**Defining value: for individual people in, or visiting, Spon End**

(i) An increased profile for the area – in terms of publicity, example and precedent: Spon End is now a platform for contemporary art, a social community and a heritage destination. This provides several opportunities for community projects, funding applications and community activism.

(ii) A community of interest – the Festival delivered an increase in first-time attendance and participation at a local arts event, where a core of residents and community leaders are now in receipt of new information, signal a new positive interest in the arts, are connected with each other, and motivated to develop local cultural participation further.

(iii) New innovations – the Festival tested a number of strategic options for the arts in local development (particularly training, schools and social inclusion-related activities). These innovations can be formulated as models of practice and adopted by Spon End organisations.

(iv) Employability – the participatory and art “making” core of the Festival was both a showcase and important experience for local artists, performers, students and aspiring young arts professionals.

**Defining value: for the community (and their venues) in Spon End:**

(i) A new space for strategic thought – the Festival provided a space of opportunity through new imagined outcomes, potential new projects, new interconnections between the community and the City. The Festival was a space for new thinking and strategic innovation for all venues who participated.

(ii) Professional experience – the venues gained experience in different kinds of public projects, but also in collaborative methods.

(iii) Increase in credentials – successful festival delivery is a valuable professional credential, useful for other roles in collaborative delivery on broader projects as well as funding applications.

(iii) Sustainability – the Festival was improvised in dialogue with partners and participants, and was not a fixed core-funded plan. Its financial management was similarly improvised with partners, and despite the evident lack of security and predictability in this arrangement a new impetus for sustainability has emerged – leveraging existing resources through increased participation, partnership and innovation management.

**9: STRATEGIC FUTURES: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This final section begins in a discursive way, drawing on critical conversations with participants, visitors and management group. Its purpose is to assess the Festival’s limits, blind-spots, inadequacies, and specific areas for strategic development. The focus is on the future strategic dimensions of the festival – planning, production, content and delivery.

**On planning:** most interlocutors were satisfied with the overall organisation of the Festival, particularly how the management group and many other professionals were volunteering their (spare) time for no financial reward. A festival that draws heavily on volunteers, however, needs a specific framework in which volunteers can find a strong rationale for continued commitment. All too many large arts projects use up the goodwill of their volunteers, who find themselves with too much responsibility, unreliable contributors, and complete the festival personally exhausted. They will not want to repeat the experience in forthcoming years, and so there emerges a crisis in the project’s sustainability. There are many festivals who simply “repeat” every year with new people, and a new program, but with no sense of long-term development or year-on-year progress (and the evolving strategic thinking that can come from that).

One management group member stated that there was an urgent need to find ways of “building management and volunteer capacity to ensure the festival organization is adequately resourced with appropriate skills and adequate reward to sustain the festival moving forward, if the intention is to grow it”. Symptomatic of this is the various remarks made by participants on the role of the “organisers” or festival “facilitators” – “the “roles” within the Festival are not clear” – they did not know who key people were, as they were not immediately identifiable or accessible (particularly true given the partner-based structure of the delivery). Adding to this is the perceived “official” status of the Festival, which seemed to concern some but not others. Does a festival that aims to represent the interests of an area of the City require a more official City endorsement or recognised identity? This is a point for discussion – one partici-

pant stated that “meetings between community members need to be “brokered” by an independent party – preferably the City Council”. However, this involves a range of implications not least a formalised, less personal and dynamic management style.

Nonetheless, the matter of planning requires further strategic development. One artist expressed a need to know “at an early stage which other artists are included”, to understand more about the professional context in which they were working, but also opportunities for dialogue, information sharing and potential collaboration. Another artist commented that the Festival needed “more motivation” for exhibitors and artists, for example, “why not sell the art works or revive the ancient market and connect it with the local display areas?” This could also be done through cultivating relationships between the artists and local business. But this would require more extensive advance planning, and moreover, a more assertive management group. Currently, the management group are more “facilitators” and co-participants [re: the principle of “participatory equivalence” indicated in Section 3]. One interlocutor remarked how the management group is overly concerned with dialogue and democratic decision-making, but should also develop “leadership”.

**On production:** one management group member explained that a “greater coordination of volunteers is needed – the organisation was effective, but volunteers offer (and demand) a greater role and set of benefits from the Festival over the period of four months.” The investment in volunteers was commendable, where special training sessions (particularly First Aid) allowed volunteers to build their own social capital and gain professional experience. The offering of particular volunteers certificates is also a positive strategic advantage. However, it also raises an issue on the distinction between volunteers (many of which are artists or venue leaders) and the remunerated contributors. One interlocutor stated that “The question of remuneration needs more consideration – as cultural workers find themselves overlapping with volunteers.” Across the arts sector nationally the subject of internships, placements, career development and remuneration is evolving – and the Festival management group might benefit from the ensuing discussions and

practices of more established arts organisations. A theoretical discussion on the nature of reward and payment (concepts of “cultural capital”) and the range of non-monetary benefits that can be awarded – training and certification is a good start.

One participant observed that “more use” could be made of the various partner venues as well as identifying and drawing on a wider range of stakeholders – in terms of their role in artistic production. A thorough stakeholder mapping would be advantageous in understanding the potential of the embryonic network the Festival has created, for management, production and delivery. One artist suggested that the Festival could “expand the platform” perhaps over two weekends. This could facilitate a broader development for a range of artists who want to work within the Festival framework in a more spontaneous, less programmatic or event-based, way.

**On content (Festival programme):** A number of interlocutors remarked that more emphasis and focus was needed on “the place” of Spon End. The area is, of course, intrinsic to the Festival’s aims as much as its identity, but some remarked that in reality the area is not as engaged as it might be in the main Festival events – like the Art Trail. One artist suggested that “more site-specific pieces would work towards this”. Indeed, there were many who suggested that more information about art works and performances was needed – not only to explain what was on offer, but what role it played in the Festival (its direct relation to Spon End) and also offer something to take away from the event at the end of the day. One visitor said “I feel I need more information on specific exhibits and works of art” Another stated that the Art Trail art works are “a bit spread out”, and not enough “signs and information sheets” are distributed in the area. Another observed that visitors to the Holyhead studios did not know enough about the studios or the art to be able to understand what it was as a venue.

One interlocutor recommended that “the selection of artists and art works might be taken in dialogue with venues, “with a view to develop the artists’ work after the Festival”. And moreover, one participant questioned the range of genres, asking for “more contemporary arts practice with a social impact – like graffiti”. One management group member observed that the Art Trail could become “more concentrated” and re-thought “in terms of the limited time frame and what it achieves in relation to the rest of the Festival”. Perhaps the Trail required a more obvious strategy – a way for the local



community to showcase its skills to visitors to the area? “Or to expose the local community to contemporary art? How can the art be of sufficient quality to attract incomers to the area?” Similarly the Summer Saturdays – does it have a “target audience”, is it for artists, volunteers and/or local residents? This introduces a range of professional curatorial questions, made complex by the partner-arrangements, open accessibility for venue members, and a social community in Spon End that is only partially visible and partially understood.

**On Delivery:** there were many remarks on the structure of the Festival, and how its expansive schedule defined a strong identity or interconnection between the various events (as a unified festival). One interlocutor states that there “was no one focal point for the Festival”, and the overlap with the Heritage Open Days is a “blurring of identities”. Nonetheless, they observed, there was beneficial “cross-marketing” of the Festival with the Open Days and with other venues. The question of unity, identity and “focus” is as much a delivery matter as a planning (or festival design) matter, as unlike traditional festival events (where all festival goers are in one location and generally experience and contiguous series of events) the Spon Spun Festival manages a range of overlapping, if continuous, audiences or constituencies. A more concerted participant analysis is required, not simply to understand existing audiences but to frame and manage the delivery of the Festival in a way that affects the creation of targeted audiences (the social segments of Spon End).

Following from this, one interlocutor suggested that more could be made to situate or offer non-commissioned participating artists access to regional art networks, or on a more limited scale, the Festival could cultivate contributions “by other neighbourhoods of the City” and create a unique collaborative network in the City. One participant suggested “if there could be a few more Spon End resident ‘festival champions’ recruited as volunteers to spread the word this would help to get more local people involved”, and some others found the lack of facilitators meant that some of the venues seemed inhibiting to walk into – “sometimes the door was shut”; more visible signage could address this – “a reassurance that all are welcome”.

One novel idea came from a venue leader, who suggested that “Participants from this year could replace some of the creators/workshop leaders for next year, so it belongs to the community”. It was evident that the Festival is yet to engage with a critical mass of residents in Spon End – or even key people who remain in a position to contribute a great deal of their knowledge and personal contacts: and “more volunteers from the two universities would be good, as well as “finding a route into the African Community in Spon End and some African inspired arts stuff would be important”.

### Key Recommendations

The above narrative will provide many points for discussion. Below are key recommendations that might frame the development of strategy for the Spon Spun Festival 2018.

1: *Distinctive identity:* the Festival should be more explicit about its innovative aspects – (i) how it can be understood as re-inventing community arts by giving a central role to contemporary art as social engagement; (ii) extending Wellbeing policy framework to include social cohesion and local cultural development; (iii) a place-based focus and a strong concern with the environment, both social, urban and natural; (v) a local festival that has a potentially international (or global?) dimension; (vi) sustainability as a theme. This all needs to be worked out as a strategy statement and made more explicit (and “louder” over, say, the rhetoric of “family fun” and so on).

2: *Local Development:* The Festival has potential to insert itself into local development frameworks as well as more explicitly connecting the Spon End communities with the *City Cultural Strategy 2017-27*. The Festival could become a strategic development framework for delivering on a range of City policy priorities – from Health and Wellbeing, Social Cohesion, arts education, vocational skills and training, Continuing Professional Development, Life Long Learning, and community arts. A strategic framework is required for this, as well as skilled management responsibilities.

3: *Partnerships:* Developing and strengthening partnerships between organisations operating in the area (the cultural infrastructure) has been productive, but now raises the question of strategic development: how does this evolve into a network or more co-

herent “infrastructure”, if that is a feasible strategic aim?

4: *The Art Trail:* Clearly a focal point of the Festival and an innovative undertaking, the Trail was successful, but also raised many points that suggest it requires its own strategic framework. This framework would take into account (i) the interconnections of the specific art works or performances with particular locations; (ii) the interconnection of Spon End residents with each work; (iii) community engagement by exhibitors or artists; (iv) the spatial-temporal matrix (calibrate how large, how far, and so on); (v) tour directions, the logic and structure of the Trail (as journey, narrative, memory, and so on).

5: *The Commissioning:* One of the significant components of the festival was the commissioning of contemporary art – as this adds a dimension of employment and investment, as well as supports the creation of original quality art for the City. In general, arts commissioning is only conducted by larger or wealthy organisations and funders, but here could be central to a growing festival as a principle of commitment. In 2017, the commissions were, by all accounts, successful. A specific strategic approach to commissioning is recommended – so as to extend commissioning as a specific programme, distinct from volunteer or non-remunerated involvement, and positioned within a tabulated framework where context, outcomes and value are anticipated in advance. A thoroughly managed commissioning programme could be unique in defining an area where contemporary artists take on the challenge of social community, heritage and a City whose professional arts sector is still in formation.

5: *The Big Party Picnic:* while on the surface the Picnic appears culturally less innovative that the commissioning of contemporary art, nevertheless plays a significant role in the gathering and communication with local people. The interconnection between the Art Trail and the Picnic, for example, was strategically important to the Festival's creation of a sense of “place”. This could be extended, while assessing its strategic aims (in terms of target audience).

6: Similarly, significant strategic questions emerge from the way the Festival has made an impact on the immediate urban environment. The Festival can be more specif-

ic about the sources of social and community dilemmas – the environment, infrastructure, resources and City Council support. One dimension that the Festival should develop is urban intervention – which almost took place in the case of the pedestrian underpass project (the Spon subway). If the local community begin to realise that the Spon Spun Festival is a means by which they can effect a fuller social transformation, then cultural participation through contemporary art will become socially compelling.

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